



Catholic **Faith, Life & Creed**

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

SACRAMENTS





Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you, Lord, as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

✓ Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session.
Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that are best
suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's
liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the *Breaking
Open the Word* worksheet for this week.

Catholic Faith, Life & Creed Version 2.0

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in
the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

June 27, 2011

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Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.



Sharing Human Experience

Catechist leads participants in a brief small group sharing exercise. Break into small groups of three or four. Remind participants to make time for all in the group to respond.

- ▶ Think of a memorable ritual experience.
- ▶ What made it memorable?
- ▶ What did the experience say to you about God?

Catechist uses their responses to launch into a discussion about sacraments. Catechist leads a brief, large group discussion with the following question.

- ▶ How do you know someone loves you?

Invite wider group reflection, surface answers such as:

- ✓ they tell you
- ✓ show you
- ✓ demonstrate it
- ✓ they offer signs of love, such as hugs and kisses
- ✓ they offer the best of themselves
- ✓ they pour out their lives

Catechist continues:

- ▶ How do you know that God loves you?

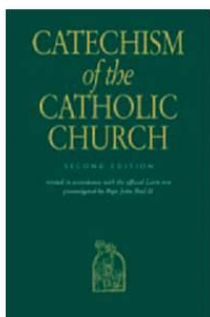
Surface responses, such as:

- ✓ God's presence in all creation
- ✓ the love of others
- ✓ Scripture and tradition
- ✓ God hugs us and loves us through the sacraments of the Church.
- ✓ Sacraments are the means by which God shows, demonstrates, and expresses his love for us.

Catechist shares story of four-year-old or other story that illustrates the importance of sacraments. (See appendix #1.)



Loaves and Fishes, by Mark Hakomaki, 2008.



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles #1145-1152.

For the next seven minutes, catechist presents section one of Catholic teaching (doctrine) regarding “Sacraments.”

- ▶ We are a sacramental people. We encounter God in the things of the earth: a beautiful sunset, the vastness of the seas, and in elements of sustenance, such as bread, wine, touch, light, or water. All creation and its elements are moments and invitations of encounter.
- ▶ All creation is graced and is a vehicle for intimate encounter with God. Sacraments, however, are privileged moments of encounter.
- ▶ Jesus’ own divine nature, the fullness of his grace, is communicated in and through the sacraments.
- ▶ The Church sets aside special symbols that help us notice the presence of God in all creation.

Catechist may wish to read the definition of sacraments given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC, 1131. Catechist continues:

- ▶ The Church has set aside signs, symbols, and symbolic actions called sacraments through which we celebrate and make present God’s saving action in the world (CCC, #1189).
- ▶ These signs and symbolic actions express and give us access to Jesus’ saving mission to the world.
- ▶ Christ is present to us within these signs, symbols, and symbolic actions.
- ▶ Within these signs, symbols, and symbolic actions is the healing, reconciling, and saving action appropriate to each individual sacrament.
- ▶ For example, in the sacrament of baptism we are plunged into the waters of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Jesus frees us from sin, washes us, makes us holy, and incorporates us into the family of God (CCC, #1214).
- ▶ In the sacrament of confirmation Christ anoints us with the oil of salvation, gifts us with the Holy Spirit, and permanently adheres himself to our lives.
- ▶ In the sacrament of Eucharist Jesus Christ, as St. Catherine of Sienna reminds us, gives himself to us as food. “What a mad lover he is!” insisted Catherine. Jesus feeds us with his love.
- ▶ In the sacrament of penance and the sacrament of anointing of the sick, he touches us with God’s healing and reconciling embrace.
- ▶ Sacraments exist in community.

- ▶ Sacraments belong to the entire community. They are not private—they belong to the Christian community (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #26).

Catechist tells a story that illustrates that sacraments exist in community: appendix #2.



Types of Sacraments

- ▶ The seven sacraments can be classified under three headings:
 - Three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist
 - Two sacraments of healing: Anointing of the Sick, Penance
 - Two sacraments of service: Marriage, Holy Orders
- ▶ Sacraments confer the grace they signify.
- ▶ When used appropriately, sacramental symbols effect what they signify; they embody what they signify (CCC, #1127, “Symbols of the Holy Spirit,” CCC, #694-701).

How Does a Sacramental Symbol Function?

See appendix #3.

- ▶ Sacramental signs are intended to be full and robust symbolic actions. When the sign is minimal, that which it points to is often difficult to observe even though it expresses the reality. When the sign is generous, (plentiful water, abundant oil, real bread, and so forth) the reality of the sign is obvious.

Catechist invites a parishioner to share an experience of sacrament in which he or she experienced a sacrament as “effecting what it signifies.”

If this session is in the context of an initiation doctrinal session, this exercise may require a sponsor to respond or it would require inviting a parishioner to come and witness to the effective power of sacrament in their lives.

Perhaps a catechumen might witness to the rite of acceptance. Catechist relates the story of Michael or another story that illustrates the way in which the symbolic action is an efficacious sign. (See appendix.)

Catechist continues:

- ▶ Sacraments assume that people approach them in faith, but they also nourish, sustain, and express faith; they instruct.
- ▶ Sacraments are not magic. There is an assumption that we approach sacraments with faith that they will be effective (CCC, #1123).
- ▶ Living a sacramental life increases love and predisposes the person to more fully approach the sacraments in love in order to grow in love.
- ▶ Sacraments are symbolic actions; they are not objects.
 - Note: Vatican II signaled a shift from sacred things to sacred actions. We see this in the change from the Code of Canon Law of 1917, which listed sacraments under *de rebus* (on things—sacred things), to the revised Code of Canon Law in 1983, which designated sacraments under the heading, Sanctifying Function (action) of the Church.
- ▶ Sacraments are not objects people receive, even though that is a common perception by many Catholics. Sacraments are acts of praise and worship.
- ▶ Sacraments make people holy; they bring us into the holiness of God.
- ▶ Sacraments build up the body of Christ. In response to so great a gift, we offer our thanks and praise (CSL, #59; CCC, #1123).

Sacraments and the Call of Justice

- ▶ Sacraments are signs to the Church about the saving mission of Christ to the world.
- ▶ We are reminded of those who have abundance and those who lack, and we are in solidarity with them. There is a call to justice in our sacramental celebrations.
- ▶ Our sacramental symbols remind us of the sins of not sharing the earth’s resources.
- ▶ Thus, through the sacramental elements, our broken lives are healed, reconciled, and restored in Christ. Sacramental signs commit us to the poor and will be effective to the extent they raise consciousness and motivate people to liberate all from oppression (CCC, #1397).



Sacraments and the Paschal Mystery

- Sacraments make present the paschal mystery (CCC, #1130). Ultimately, every sacrament makes present and brings into our midst Christ's life, death, and resurrection, which is known as the paschal mystery. Sacraments are an invitation to join our lives to the paschal mystery of Christ and, in so doing, participate in the ongoing work of redemption in the world.

See appendix #4 for optional reflection on the paschal mystery. Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups. Catechist poses the questions. Catechist allows for about seven minutes of small group reflection. Catechist invites wider group sharing of insights gleaned.

- What does it mean to you to join your life to the paschal mystery of Christ?
- How might the sacrament of Eucharist, for example, bring you into the mystery of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit?
- What is going on in your life at this time that joining your own joys, struggles, and sorrows to Christ's paschal mystery would offer you profound meaning for your life?

Catechist continues:

- Ultimately, sacraments strengthen us to more effectively live a life of discipleship, to be more fully in communion with God in Christ.
- Sacraments strengthen us to go out into the world and become what we have received, to become bread for others, to allow our blood to be shed for others.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions with one other person (in dyads).

Catechist leads participants in a discussion about what the Church teaches about sacraments:

- What in the teaching on sacraments touched you or spoke to your heart?
- Have you ever had an experience of sacraments or ritual in which you experienced what the Church teaches about sacraments? In other words, have you ever had an experience of ritual, for example, in which it was obvious that it was

not a private affair, but belonged instead to the entire community?

- ▶ Have you ever had the experience in which a sign or symbol accomplished what it was intended to accomplish (effected what it signified)?
- ▶ Have you ever had the experience in which participation in ritual strengthened you to reach out in justice to those in need?



Community Connections

Catechist invites participants to relate what was shared today to an experience in their lives. Catechist shares an experience from his or her life and invites others to do the same.

Liturgy, Scripture, and doctrine challenge us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world.

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity taking place and makes arrangements for group participation.

In light of the call of the sacraments to share our resources, what is taking place in the parish this week that invites your participation?

For example, “This week our parish is responsible for cooking the meal on Wednesday night for our city’s homeless shelter. We are going to meet at daily bread to serve the meal and then we will reflect on our experience after we have cleaned up.”



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following challenge by writing their response in their journal or sharing with one other person.

- ▶ In what way does this teaching on the sacraments challenge you and the Christian community?
- ▶ In what way does today's session challenge you to change?
- ▶ Is there a behavior or attitude in need of transformation?
- ▶ What are you willing to commit to do in response to your reflection on the word and Church teaching regarding the sacraments?
- ▶ Perhaps persons commit to a specific spiritual and Corporal work of mercy in response to God's call. (See handout.)



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions, Doxology ("Glory be to the Father..."), a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA, #90-97.

Option 2: Intercessions, Doxology, Opening Prayer B: #39, Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions, *Sacramentary*.

Appendix

1. STORY OF FOUR-YEAR-OLD

The story of the four-year-old child's conversation with his mother appropriately expresses the importance of sacraments in our lives. A four-year-old ran into his parents' room in the middle of the night. He was very afraid. "Mommy, I can't sleep. I am afraid of monsters." Mommy said to the four-year-old, "Sweetie, you do not need to worry about monsters or anything else. God is always with you." Hesitating for a moment, the insistent four-year-old retorted, "Mommy, I want someone with skin!"

2. STORY OF FIRST COMMUNION CHILDREN

The pastor of a Florida parish powerfully illustrated the Church's theology that sacraments exist in community in a first Communion homily he presented several years ago. He invited the children to stand. He then invited the gathered community to applaud the beautiful children. He invited the children to sit down and observe.

The pastor then invited their parents to stand. "Parents," he continued, "you have been the first witness of Jesus to your children. You have brought them to this celebration by the witness of your love for them and your love for God. We affirm you and applaud you for your part in bringing our children to this celebration." All applauded. "Please remain standing."

He then asked the siblings to stand and reminded them that they too have had a part in bringing their brother or sister to this day by the love they have shown and the way they love Jesus and live according to his commands. All applauded the siblings. Again he asked them to remain standing.

He then invited the grandparents to stand. "You," he gently reminded, "have had a very special role in bringing these beautiful children to this wonderful celebration of God's love. Not only have you raised your own children and passed on the faith to them, you have loved your grandchildren. Most importantly you have told them stories of Jesus and shared your faith with them. Let us extend a huge applause for our grandparents. You remain standing as well." All applauded.

He then turned to aunts, uncles, and friends and affirmed their role in forming the first Communion children and asked them to remain standing. He finally turned to the community. "People of our parish, you too have had a role in bringing the children to this day. Our children have watched you pray. They have observed you extend Christ's love in outreach. They have celebrated Eucharist with you week after week, and you have taught them what it means to be a disciple. Let us affirm everyone in our parish."

Again all applauded. A hush descended on the community. "Who now is standing?" he asked them. They loudly responded, "All of us." Then he said, "Children, please take note: the African proverb is so right-on. It really does take a village to raise a child."

Everyone in this church had a part in bringing you to this wonderful day in your life as a disciple of Christ.” Sacraments exist for the community and within it.

3. HOW DOES A SACRAMENTAL SYMBOL FUNCTION?

The ancient Rabbi explained how a symbol functions. He took a coin from his pocket. He broke the coin in two. He hid one piece of the coin, the other he placed in the hand of his student. He told the student, “There are two pieces of this coin that when joined together make one complete coin, one reality. One piece you can see, the other hidden. The hidden part is every bit as much a part of the truth or the reality of the coin as the part you can see. It is simply hidden. That is how a symbol works. The symbol (bread, wine, hands, oil, water, etc.) is the element one can see, touch, taste. The hidden part is the spiritual reality that is also part of the truth of the symbol.”

The hidden reality of the symbol of eucharistic bread is that it is the body of Christ; the hidden part of eucharistic wine is the reality of Christ’s blood. The hidden reality of the oil of confirmation is the reality of the Holy Spirit. If a symbol could speak it would not say, “I am like,” or “I resemble that which I signify.” It would say, “I am the reality I signify.” Symbol comes from the word meaning, “to throw together.” The hidden, spiritual reality is “thrown together” with the concrete object to create a symbol.

4. STORY OF MICHAEL

Michael was baptized in a beautiful immersion font in which his entire body was covered with water. As he went down into the baptismal waters he forgot to take a large breath. His reflection reminds us of how effective the sacramental sign truly is. “I realized I could die in those waters. I realized that this ritual has something to say about death. I was dying to something. I was dying to the person I used to be. I think I understood for the first time what it means to participate in the dying of Jesus. I died in those waters. A new me emerged. I felt like I was in a watery womb—I was being born again. Thirty-five years of sin was washed away. When I came up out of the water and the community stood to applaud and welcome me, I realized I was born again into a new family, a family of faith.”

5. OPTIONAL REFLECTION ON SACRAMENTS AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

Within every sacrament we experience the total *kenosis*, self-emptying of Jesus on the cross, an emptying he gives as a sign of God’s love for the human race. Sacramental theologian Louis Marie Chauvet insists that in every sacrament we are privileged participants in the drama between the Father and the Son, the Son who completely empties himself in the face of total abandonment. The innocent tortured Son echoes Psalm 22’s lament of an innocent sufferer: “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” In the sacraments we are given privileged access to the intimacy

between the Father and the Son, the grief-stricken Father, the near-despairing and abandoned Son.

The Father Jesus defended with his life is the same Father who could send armies to rescue him. Yet, what does God do? God remains silent. The Father hides his face. What kind of a Father is he? He is a Father not just of the Son, but of all those the Son came to save. Jesus had work left to do; he had to take his love for humanity to its final conclusion. To be in solidarity with the human condition meant that Jesus had to experience death in the face of God's silence, a God who spares no one from it, not even his own faithful Son.

Jesus had to experience the absolute separation of human death and abandonment before he could be truly one with the human race. Chauvet insists that the paschal mystery that is present in the sacraments introduces us to a Christ who knows what it means to be abandoned, tortured, and seemingly without hope, who poured himself out for every broken person in the world, for us in our times of abandonment, and who invites us to offer the same self-sacrifice for others.

Every time we come to the sacraments we are invited to empty ourselves as offering for those who are most abandoned and in so doing share in the ongoing redemption of the cross. What Christ says to us in the sacraments is: "Do you know how much I love you? This much." Then he stretched out his arms and he died.

Handout on the Sacraments

- ▶ We are a sacramental people. We encounter God in the things of the earth: a beautiful sunset, the vastness of the seas, and in elements of sustenance, such as bread, wine, touch, light, or water. All creation and its elements are moments and invitations of encounter.
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